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Why They Call It A Community Plan

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Guest columnist
Why they call it a community plan

By Peter Steinbrueck
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A recent media blitz has sought to portray new city redevelopment efforts in Northgate, South Lake Union and the University District as simply new-jobs-versus-no-jobs.

This is a false and simplistic characterization of the real issues at hand. Jobs bring spending and tax revenue to the city, which are sorely needed in these tough economic times. More importantly, new jobs replace old jobs that many of our residents no longer have.

But there are different ways that jobs can affect the city.

There are those jobs that get filled by non-residents, who add to the morning and evening commutes, require parking spaces and leave a void in the community at night. Then there are those jobs filled by local residents, who walk, bike or ride our mass-transportation systems to and from work, shop, access local services, spend money day and night, and are concerned with the character, quality, safety and livability of their neighborhood.

We like all jobs, but we prefer the latter.

In the early 1990s, the state Growth Management Act required cities to draw up comprehensive plans to accommodate job and population growth. The idea was to target certain areas for high-density development, provide sewer, road and power infrastructures to accommodate growth in those areas, and prevent sprawl into less-developed regions.

Remember the term Californication?

Seattle's comprehensive plan, which took five years to create through discussion and debate among thousands of citizens, city staff and elected officials, specified 20-year growth targets for each neighborhood, and identified five urban centers for higher-density growth. Northgate and the University District are two of the targeted urban centers while South Lake Union is designated a hub urban village.

The comprehensive plan took a three-pronged approach to create what some call "live, work and play" communities. In these communities, there is ample housing for those who work there to live in, and ample jobs so community residents can work nearby. Because there are set targets for housing and jobs, city planners can adequately prepare and budget for the necessary roads, sidewalks, pipes and utility lines. Parks, libraries and community centers can be built to meet the targeted needs.

The current proposals for Northgate, South Lake Union and the University District all have two things in common — they are driven solely by the speculative promise of new jobs and they

largely ignore the community planning process. Even the less politically astute in this town can tell you that exclusion does not breed buy-in.

Seattle is proud of being defined by its neighborhoods; even the urban center concept established by the Growth Management Act was eventually embraced as a way to create dense, mixed-use, urban neighborhoods. These centers would absorb greater densities of growth, but only if they could retain a semblance of community.

The comprehensive plan allows for variances and, in fact, anticipated the unexpected. Once one prong of an urban center begins to grow disproportionately, a mechanism is triggered to call the planners back together. The community balance can be restored, even if it means allowing for much greater job growth than previously anticipated. In the comprehensive plan, nothing is set in stone. Nothing except a commitment to community involvement.

When a grand opportunity for economic development presents itself, the city should not miss out. Not for the whim of an easy new tax base, but for the opportunity to further our community vision. Part of that vision is involvement and inclusion. The process is our progress.

This is called community planning because it represents a collective vision, not the dreams of an individual or special interest. Real leadership embraces the collective vision of the entire community and shows us how to get there.